PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY PAMPHLET

THE GREAT FLINT SIT-DOWN STRIKE AGAINST GM 1936-37

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A NOTE TO READERS

The Great Flint Sit-Down Strike is a "classic" PLP pamphlet written in 1965—almost exactly halfway between today and the Great Sit-Down Strike itself. It was written at a time when our party was working to put down roots among industrial workers and build a base for revolution—as we are today. It was written at a time when many people who called themselves "left" were putting forward wrong ideas that workers

- couldn't see that capitalism was their enemy and take action against it, and
- were too prosperous and bought-off to fight, or
- were living off the work of workers in other countries and were the enemy, or
- were unimportant because technology had created a "new working class" of technicians and "knowledge workers."

This pamphlet served an important role in defeating those wrong ideas, both among some party members, and among workers and students in the party's base. In addition, thousands of copies of the original pamphlet were used in college labor history courses, and helped keep alive a piece of history the bosses wanted hidden.

Today, though, you can hear the wrong ideas (or actually, not ideas but reflections of ruling-class ideology) not only in the bosses' press, but from the mouths of union leaders and false friends of workers everywhere. The fight to defeat this crippling ideology and to build a mass communist base for revolution in the working class, including in basic industry, is still a critical task for our party.

The copy you are reading is a work-in-progress. It contains the original text, altered only to correct a few grammar and

spelling errors, and to change some references to 1965 from "today" to "in 1965." A few definitions have been added to footnotes, and the bibliographic references have not yet been scanned and restored, although their numbers appear in the text. A glossary will be added to the final reprint, as well.

As you read, you will see signs that in 1965 we had not yet developed as clear an understanding as we have now of the role of unions, and the correct ways for communists to work in them. Our understanding has changed in other ways, too, and these will be reflected in essays and articles which will accompany the completed reprint. The essays will discuss the development of our line and work in trade unions and other mass organizations, and also the changes that have taken place in the automobile industry and others, as the companies and the industry have become more internationalized and the terms of their competition have changed.

As you use this document, whether on a trip to Flint, or in club discussions, study groups or base-building, please give us your help. If you come across words that should be explained in the glossary, or ideas that should be developed, or have experiences to share with readers, or even find some typos, please send them to the PLP office, marked Attention: Flint Pamphlet.

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How Industrial Unionism Was Won:

THE GREAT FLINT SIT-DOWN STRIKE AGAINST GM 1936-37

by Walter Linder

> *The foreman paced slowly past his workmen, his eyes darting in and out of the machines, eager for any betraying gesture. He heard no word, and he saw no gesture. The hands flashed, the backs bent, the arms reached out in monotonous perfection. The foreman went back to his little desk and sat squirming on the smooth-seated swivel chair. He felt profoundly disturbed. Something, he knew, was coming off. But what? For God's sake, what?*

It was 1:57 A.M., January 29, 1936.

The tirebuilders worked in smooth frenzy, sweat around their necks, under their arms. the belt clattered, the insufferable racket and din and monotonous clash and uproar went on in steady rhythm. The clock on the south wall, a big plain clock, hesitated; its minute hand jumped to two. A tirebuilder at the end of the line looked up, saw the hand jump. The foreman was sifting quietly staring at the lines of men working under the vast pools of light. Outside, in the winter night, the streets were empty, and the whir of the factory sounded faintly on the snow-swept yard.

The tirebuilder at the end of the line gulped. His hands stopped their quick weaving motions. Every man on the line stiffened. All over the vast room, hands hesitated. The foreman saw the falter, felt it instantly. He jumped up, but he stood beside his desk, his eyes darting quickly from one line to another.

This was it, then. But what was happening? Where was It starting? He stood perfectly still, his heart beating furiously, his throat feeling dry, watching the hesitating hands, watching the broken rhythm.

Then the tirebuilder at the end of the line walked three steps to the master safety switch and, drawing a deep breath, he pulled up the heavy wooden handle. With this signal, in perfect synchronization, with the rhythm they had learned in a great mass-production industry, the tirebuilders stepped back from their machines.

Instantly, the noise stopped. The whole room lay in perfect silence. The tirebuilders stood in long lines, touching each other, perfectly motionless, deafened by the silence. A moment ago there had been the weaving hands, the revolving wheels, the clanking belt, the moving hooks, the flashing tire tools. Now there was absolute stillness, no motion anywhere, no sound.

Out of the terrifying quiet came the wondering voice of a big tirebuilder near the windows: "Jesus Christ, it's like the end of the world."

He broke the spell, the magic moment of stillness. For now his awed words said the same thing to every man, "We done it!' We stopped the belt! By God, we done it!"' And men began to cheer hysterically, to shout and howl in the fresh silence. Men wrapped long sinewy arms around their neighbors' shoulders, screaming, "We done it! We done it!"

For the first time in history, American mass-production workers had stopped a conveyor belt and halted the inexorable movement of factory machinery.

—From *Industrial Valley,* by Ruth McKenney, NY, 1939, pp. 261-2.

The victory of the Akron rubber workers revealed the full power of the sit-down strike for the first time. The tactic of seizing possession of, and holding, great plants was not entirely unknown to the workers of the United States, but nothing like its mushrooming during the struggles of the mid-Thirties had ever been seen before. In the sit-down strike the workers found a weapon with which they could conquer the powerful resistance to unionization they met in the drive to organize

rubber, auto, steel, electrical and other basic industries. One by one giant manufacturing corporations like General Motors, United States Steel, General Electric and Goodyear, the massive industrial aggregates of monopoly capital, were compelled to recognize and deal with the union. In some cases the resistance of the giants collapsed at scarcely more than the threat of a sit-down because they had seen its power. We could say that industrial unionism was born in the sit-down strikes. Certainly the impetus given to unionization by the sit-down strikes in 1936-7 was the main force that finally brought more than five millions into the emerging Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

One union more than any other, the United Auto Workers, can be singled out as the greatest contributor to the organization of the CIO and the success of industrial unionism because it took leadership and because its struggle was fought out most decisively.

One company more than any other, General Motors, can be singled out as 'the key to the organization of the auto workers' because it was the largest manufacturer in the industry—and the largest manufacturing corporation in the world—and was the first to be organized.

One part of the GM empire more than any other—Flint, Michigan—was the bastion that the workers had to take in order to smash the open shop among the mass of unskilled workers in the auto industry. It was here that most of the bodies for all GM cars, and all the engines for its biggest money-maker, Chevrolet, were manufactured. Flint was possibly the most completely controlled of any company town in the country.

For 44 days, from December 30, 1936 to February 11, 1937, the GM workers fought the corporation in a great sit-down struggle, centered in Flint, to test whether a union could or could not exist in General Motors.. In this test, GM employed every tactic its strength and cunning could devise, including full use of every level of government it controlled. The workers, employing the tactic of the sit-down to a degree unequalled in the country's history, met attack with counterattack, took the offensive and finally emerged with a decisive victory.

The Flint strike was preceded by a fresh wave of unionization, born of desperate conditions, that swept through the masses of working people. This power took shape in militant strikes, in bitter struggles and protest actions in many industries, and in the rallying of millions to the cause of labor. And it might come as a surprise to the auto workers of today that in the 1930s it was the communists and the Communist Party that played a fundamental role in the building of the UAW. However, as will be seen, fundamental weaknesses existed within this communist leadership which were partly responsible for the workers' inability to withstand a later bosses' offensive that attempted to wipe out all the gains of the 1937 victory.

Despite these weaknesses, the Flint sit-down was a peak at which the workers made a stand and by the strength of collective action turned defeat into victory. It demonstrated the tremendous power inherent in such unshakable unity. It contains more lessons for the working class than any other struggle for industrial unionism, and perhaps than any other labor struggle in our history.

One of the first sit-down strikes occurred in 1906 at General Electric's Schenectady, New York plant.[1] In 1910, women garment workers in New York City sat down in, a shop to prevent their bosses from farming out work to contractors not on strike.[2] Variations occurred in Poland, Yugoslavia and France from the end of the First World War to the early Thirties. In 1933, 2,500 workers stayed inside the Hormel Packing Company plant in Austin, Minnesota, during a three-day strike.[3]

An origin of the concept among the rubber workers is cited by labor historian Louis Adamic.[4] Two teams of rubber workers were playing baseball in Akron one Sunday afternoon in 1933. Suddenly they refused to continue the game because they discovered that the umpire, whom they and the fans disliked anyway, was not a union man. They just sat down on the field. The fans, mostly rubber workers, ha1f seriously and half in fun, yelled for "a union ump." The "scab" was forced to retire from the field and a union man was found to take his place. A few days later a dispute broke out in the

plant. When the foremen denied their grievance, the men, remembering the tactic successfully employed on the ballfield, sat down—and won. The tactic spread rapidly through the industry; the event described by Ruth McKenney in *Industrial Valley* was the beginning of the first factory-wide sit-down by rubber workers. From there the concept spread to workers of the other basic industries. Adamic attributes the leadership of the early rubber industry sit-downs to left-wingers working in Akron at the time. European press coverage of the 1936 Akron sit-downs was believed to have directly influenced the sit-down strike in the Semperit rubber works in Krakow, Poland on March 22, 1936, in which six workers were killed and 22 wounded.[5]

U.S. workers found the sit-down to have many advantages over the traditional forms of strike. It prevents the use of scabs to operate a factory, since the strikers guard the machines; it is harder for the company to oust men from inside a plant than break through an encircling picket line. Bosses are more reluctant to resort to strikebreaking violence, because it directly endangers millions of dollars of company property, vast assembly lines and unfinished products. The use of machine guns, tear gas and gangsters is much less effective. It is harder to label strikers aggressors while they are inside.

In a sit-down the workers' morale is heightened. They are inside and therefore know for certain that scabs are not operating the machines; they are really protecting their jobs and this leads to a higher degree of solidarity and militancy. The men are protected from weather. They are never scattered, but are always on call at a moment's notice in case of trouble. The basic democratic character of the sit-down is guaranteed by the fact that the workers on the line, rather than outside officials, determine its course.

Finally, defense against labor spies—a constant threat in the Thirties—is perfected because a sit-down can be started by one or two rank-and-file leaders over an issue that affects the entire plant. The workers vote by putting down their tools.

The sit-down is not a revolutionary action; it does not challenge the boss's ownership of the plant but only, as with traditional strike forms, his right to fire the workers and operate with scabs. Nevertheless, the experience of the Thirties in the U.S. demonstrated the sit-down as a more intense form of struggle that stimulates tremendous initiative among the rank-and-file, especially among those on the inside during a prolonged strike.

There is no question that the auto workers needed a new weapon with which to fight the giant corporations that owned them body and soul. GM ran Flint like a feudal barony. Eighty per cent of the population of 150,000 were directly dependent on GM for livelihood, 20 per cent indirectly. Forty-five thousand men and women toiled in the GM Flint plants, heart and nerve center of the corporation's world-wide empire. In the summer of 1936 every city official—the mayor, city manager, police chief and the judges—were GM stockholders or officials, or both. The only local newspaper, The Flint Journal, was 100 per cent GM, all the time. The corporation controlled the radio station directly: even paid-for time was denied the union during the fight for unionization. The school board, welfare department and all other government agencies were directly under the thumb of the corporation. Billboards throughout the city acclaimed "the happy GM family."

Total domination of the workers and the community in which they lived was part of the system by which GM was able to net an average annual profit of $173 million from 1927 to 1937[6] during the depths of the Great Depression. Eighty stockholders became millionaires in four years during the late Twenties on GM dividends alone. In 1936 the auto giant completed a quarter-century with profits that totaled an astronomical $2.5 billion, a figure unequalled by any other corporation in the world up to that time. Its 1936 net profit was $225 millions, a rate of 24 per cent on a capitalization of $945 millions. No wonder it earned and kept the title of the "world's greatest money-maker" among all corporations.

GM, in 1936 employing 55 per cent of all U.S. auto workers in 69 plants, was bigger than Ford and Chrysler combined. Three hundred and fifty of its officers and directors were paid ten million dollars in salaries that year. Its two top officers, Alfred Sloan and William Knudson, received $375,000 each in 1935. Its seventh vice-president, one Charles Wilson, received $190,000.[7] The giant was controlled by the DuPont interests, which owned about a quarter of the stock.

The condition of the auto workers was in stark contrast to that of their bosses. In 1935, a year in which the government declared $1,600 as the minimum income on which a family of four could live decently, the average auto worker took home $900. Most lived in fearful insecurity. A foreman could fire at will. Layoffs between the old and new model year lasted from three to five months, without unemployment insurance. A compulsory loan system prevailed, under which GM deducted principal plus interest on the worker's return to employment in the fall, cutting wages 10 per cent.

But it was the speed-up that made life intolerable. A wife described her husband as "coming home so dog-tired he couldn't even walk upstairs to bed but crawled on his hands and knees"

One witness reported: "The men worked like fiends, their jaws set and eyes on fire. Nothing in the world exists for them except the line chassis bearing down on them relentlessly. They come along on a conveyor, and as each passes, the worker has to finish his particular job before the next one bears down on him. The line moves fast and the chassis are close together. The men move like lightning. Some are underneath on their backs on little carts, propelling themselves by their heels all day long, fixing something underneath the chassis as they move along." [8]

Young workers, unused to the unbearable pace, couldn't eat until they threw up their previous meals when they got home. One worker told *Atlantic Monthly* that he had been made so dizzy by the constant noises of the assembly line that when he left the plant he could not remember where he had parked his car.[9]

Walter Moore, a welder, father of eight and section organizer for the Communist Party in Flint, told a reporter: "Did you ever see a house in the country on fire? They tear up the carpets, rip out the furniture, throw everything out of the windows and doors, work at white heat while great, red flames shoot up to the sky. Well, that's a shop, only in a shop It goes on and on; the fire never goes out."[10]

Flint workers were described as having a "peculiar, gray, jaundiced color," like "a city of tuberculars,"[11] and in July, 1936, when temperatures soared over 100 degrees, deaths in Michigan's auto plants rose into the hundreds.[12]

The speed-up was intensified by the ever-present threat of layoffs.. "The fear of layoff is always in their minds, even if not definitely brought there by the foremen. The speed-up is thus inherent in the…lack of steady work and an army of unemployed waiting outside."[13]

It was the speed-up that organized Flint.

If any worker had "strange ideas" in his head about a union. a vast network of company spies was present to ferret him out immediately. Inexorable working-class pressure had forced exposures like those that came out of a Senate subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, headed by Robert LaFollette. Testimony before that Committee—much of it by workers at the risk of their lives—revealed that GM spent $839,000 in 1934 alone on "detective work,"[14] more than half of it paid to the Pinkerton agency. Hundreds of spies worked in the plants, seeking out those who had union "inclinations." GM was a member of the National Metal Trades Association, a company group that supplied labor spies to terrorize workers and import scabs and helped set up company unions to break or forestall legitimate unions. The Committee reported that the Justice Department and Army and Navy Intelligence worked with this outfit in union-busting forays. Little came of these revelations, since, in the final analysis, it was the union victories of the workers themselves that ended the terror in the plants.

In addition, GM used the forces of the notorious Black Legion, a DuPont-financed terror group that beat, tarred and feathered and murdered active unionists. GM foremen were actually seen donning black robes inside the plant in

preparation for a Black Legion raid.[15] Organized force inside the plants had to be defeated to bring the union to auto.

Attempts had been made to fight the auto moguls early in the depression. In July 1930 a communist-led union struck Fisher Body No. 1 and marched into downtown Flint with banners flying: "In 1776 we fought for Liberty. Today we fight for bread."[16]

Prior to this there had been little organizing attempted in the auto industry. However, in 1933, the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), a left-led organizing group, created the Auto Workers Union along industrial lines. It conducted strikes which eventually involved tens of thousands and which were met with ferocious brutality, especially at the Briggs Auto Works in Flint. The TUUL-type militancy not only earned the hatred of the corporations but also of the staid, sellout business unionism of the AFL piecards.*

The AFL since its birth had opposed the organization of unskilled workers, and especially along industrial lines—that is, placing all the different types of workers in one plant into the same union. The AFL had intended all along to keep auto workers divided, both along craft lines and from one plant or company to the next. It organized federal locals for this purpose—groups of workers in a particular plant responsible directly to the national Federation and barred from joining together with. all other auto workers on an industry-wide basis. These locals were ruled by national officers and an executive board appointed by AFL President William Green.

When the AFL attempted to step into the auto industry soon after the Briggs strikes, the TUUL locals, in a move for unity, dissolved and joined the AFL federal locals. The entrance of the TUUL left-wing militants into these locals was a first step towards the creation of an industrial union.[17] Thus, when the AFL, attempting to contain the auto workers' rising militancy—which was poison to the narrow concepts of craft unionism—called a national conference of its federal locals, the latter sent rank-and-file leaders who called for an "international industrial union." As they rose to speak, William Collins, the AFL piecard in charge of auto organizing, would snap, "Sit down! You're a Communist! Every time I hear the words 'international industrial union' I know that person…represents the Communist Party."[18]

Wyndham Mortimer, a militant left-winger who led the local which he helped organize at Cleveland's White Motor Company—and later became UAW first vice-president—wrote in 1951: "That there were some Communists among them, there is not the slightest doubt. In fact, had it not been for the Communists, there is serious doubt that the forces of industrial unionism would have lived through this period."[19]

In 1934, President Roosevelt ignored GM's refusal to negotiate-a violation of the NRA collective bargaining Section 7a, He proposed a compromise: proportional representation of all union groups in a plant—including the company unions! He also set up an Auto Labor Board, charged with the responsibility of determining which union should represent the workers; the union later discovered that labor's representative on the Board was a member of the Black Legion!

Disregarding the interests of the rank and file while negotiating with the companies, the AFL leadership sacrificed every single demand, including the essential one for union recognition. Thousands of auto workers made huge bonfires of their union cards and quit in disgust. The left-wingers organized the Cleveland Auto Council, which sponsored another national conference at which 37 locals were represented, and again the AFL intervened to try to prevent an industrial union from forming.

At that point even a government report warned that because of "insecurity, low annual earnings, inequitable hiring and rehiring methods, espionage, speedup, and displacement of workers at an extremely early age…Unless something is done soon, they (the workers) intend to take things Into their own hands to get results." [20]

Finally, with pressure growing for the mass organization of auto workers, agreement was won in May, 1936, to give the auto workers autonomy inside the AFL for what was, in effect, an industrial union. The infant UAW—along with the other unions affiliated to the newly-emerging Committee for Industrial Organization—were suspended in August by the AFL leadership because of their industrial union concepts.

In April, 1936, however, the AFL was still trying to keep Its foot in the door. It succeeded in getting a compromise candidate elected president of the new UAW. He was Homer Martin, a former Baptist minister and Kansas City Chevrolet worker. Martin was long on oratory and had a flair for phrasing the workers' aspirations, but he was short on organizing ability and on understanding the dynamics of industrial unionism. For these reasons, the AFL officials felt Martin was someone they could use, unlike the militant left-wing industrial unionists. Mortimer was elected first vice-president; Ed Hall, nearing 50. and having spent nearly all his life in Milwaukee's auto plants, the possessor of a basic understanding of an auto worker's problems, became second vice-president; and Walter Reuther was elected to the Executive Board from Detroit's West Side, with what Mortimer charged were forged credentials.[21]

In June Mortimer was selected by the fledgling UAW to be its organizer in the heart of GM territory. Martin agreed to this because he thought Mortimer would be broken there and would cease to be a threat to Martin's position in the union.[22] Mortimer came from a union family; his father had been a leader of the central Pennsylvania Knights of Labor. UAW's Flint organizer had been a miner, railroad brakeman, steel worker and machinist at White Motor.

When Mortimer arrived to begin his work in the summer of 1936, there were barely 100 union members in the city, and the majority of those were company spies.[23] All the others, 20,000 of them, had quit. The sellout policies of the AFL leadership and Roosevelt's intervention had helped the auto companies destroy any union organization, however shaky, that had existed in Flint. Recognizing the stoolie-ridden, AFL-organized Flint local for what it was, Mortimer set about organizing a completely independent group, visiting workers from door to door, signing them up, and sending the records to UAW national headquarters. This enraged the GM labor spies, but, though tailed and watched at every turn, Mortimer succeeded in keeping membership lists out of their hands. He began publishing a newsletter which went out to 7,000 workers each week. He also organized a secret union group in the Fisher Body No. 1 "body-in-white" department, where the main soldering and welding was done. This group was led by Bud Simons, Walter Moore and Joe Devitt, a trio of close personal friends who shared progressive views. Moore was a communist and the other two were "political left-wingers."[24]

When Martin saw Mortimer succeeding, the UAW president—backed by followers of the renegade Jay Lovestone who had been expelled from the Communist Party—pressed for his removal.[25] Mortimer succumbed, but managed to arrange for Robert Travis to take his place. In his early thirties, Travis had been successful in leading and organizing Toledo Chevrolet. He shared Mortimer's left-wing views and was regarded as atop-flight organizer despite his youth.

Slowly but surely the UAW gained strength. The fact that the discredited AFL had suspended the CIO helped draw workers into the new industrial union. Seniority agreements were won at Chrysler Dodge. In Fisher Body, union stickers began to appear on auto bodies and carry their message the length of the assembly line. With GM supporting Landon for President but losing as the workers voted for Roosevelt overwhelmingly, the union began to resist the corporation more strongly. Seven stoppages, provoked by speed-up and wage cuts, occurred at Fisher Body No. 1 in the second week of November, 1936. When Travis asked Simons if the men were ready to strike, Simons said, "Ready? They're like a pregnant woman in her tenth month."[26] On November 9th, Travis met with 40 members, key men from each department, to plan how to organize a sit-down should an incident occur. Three days later, on November 12, it did.

A foreman eliminated one man from a three-man unit and ordered the other two to do the work. Although the other two were not union members, they stopped working and were fired the next morning. Starting from Simons' group on the incoming night shift, word spread through the 7,000-man plant—"Nobody starts working." The foreman seized the man who had been removed from the group and began to shove him toward the plant superintendent. Simons stepped in and

stopped him while the entire assembly line watched. A committee was picked on the spot to meet with the boss as a committee—the first time this had ever happened at Fisher Body.

The super was stunned. He gave in and agreed to rehire the two workers who had been fired, but the men, in spite of an agreement that they would not be docked for time lost in the stoppage, still refused to go back to work. They demanded that the two workers be brought back to the plant. The company was forced to broadcast over local and police radio to find the two men, one of whom was on a date with his girl. No one started working until he had driven her home, changed his clothes and reported for work!

This story spread through Flint like wildfire. Workers began signing up by the hundreds. GM was forced to bargain with various units on day-to-day grievances. Although John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers and head of the new CIO, along with the other CIO leaders, had planned to organize the steel industry first, the young UAW organizers took the lead.

Among units of the GM empire, the Fisher Body "mother plants" in Flint and Cleveland were the heart. They produced dies and chassis on which three-fourths of GM production depended and the company found it too cumbersome to store chassis against a strike. Without the chassis there could be no automobile. Production was crippled if the supply was cut off at the source. Another key plant was Chevrolet No. 4 in Flint. Every engine for one million Chevrolets was assembled there each year. Chevy No. 4 was called the "the hellhole" by its 8,000 workers; it was dominated end to end by its manager, Arnold Lenz, a Hitler sympathizer. But when the union ferreted out and exposed a couple of stoolies at Chevy 4, respect for the union shot up and a rapid increase in membership followed.

Then auto strikers at Midland Steel, led by communists, beat the red scare and won union recognition. A sit-down at Bendix compelled the company to bargain with the union. Still, in the estimate of the UAW leadership, the situation was not yet ripe for a national struggle with GM. In fact, when Martin, on tour, threatened a nation-wide strike without consulting the executive board, he was stopped. He had made this threat after a November 18 walkout at a union weak spot, the Chevy plant in Atlanta, where four workers had been fired for wearing union buttons. From Detroit, UAW vice-president Ed Hall located Martin in Kansas City and told him: " You dumb son-of-a-bitch! You get your ass back here tonight or that'll be the last trip you'll ever take!" [27]

The decision was made by the UAW leadership not to call a national strike until Fisher Body in Flint and Cleveland were ready, which Travis estimated would take another month. Knowing this, GM tried to force the issue by provoking a strike on December 16 at Kansas City, a union weak spot as Atlanta was. GM hoped to lure the union into a national walkout when it wasn't prepared. Again the union held firm and the Kansas City strike, later found to have been set off by a Pinkerton agent, was localized.

On December 17, Martin requested national collective bargaining in a telegram to GM management. Management, aiming to split the union into 69 parts, replied that it would bargain only on a plant-by-plant basis. On December 28, the first action occurred at Fisher Body in Cleveland where the workers in the quarter panel department yanked the power when the plant manager postponed a bargaining session for a few hours. All other departments followed and by one o'clock in the afternoon the plant was dead. Through the mediation of Mayor Harold Burton, later a Supreme Court justice, GM tried to bargain on a local basis; but the union turned down the ruse. A unanimous vote at a plant mass meeting decided the sit-down would be ended only as a part of a national settlement. This action had disrupted the timetable of even the UAW leadership, which had planned to begin strike action against GM in Flint. A few weeks later the Cleveland workers had to leave the plant and conduct their strike from the outside because they did not have the strength to maintain the sit-down. It was the Flint workers who had to carry the ball.

Their strike began at Fisher Body No. 1 on December 30, only two days after the start of the Cleveland sit-down. When the

night shift came on at No. I on the 30th, they found that the company had backed up a string of railroad cars and was starting to move dies. This was GM's version of the runaway shop, an open attempt to shift production to a plant where the union was weak and thus destroy Fisher Body No. 1 as a decisive unit. Travis was notified at the union office across the street. He immediately called the workers to a lunch-hour meeting by the pre-arranged signal of a 200-watt red lamp which the workers could see flickering in the union headquarters. When they had filled the hall, Travis said, "What do we do about the dies?" A worker answered: "Well, them' s our jobs. We want them left right here in Flint."

Travis reviewed the company moves. He pointed out that the Cleveland workers were out on strike to save their jobs, and again he asked, "What do we do?'

"Shut her down! Shut the goddamn plant!" came the cry.[28]

Henry Kraus, a UAW editor at the meeting, describes the scene: "The men stood still facing the door. It was like trying to chain a natural force. They couldn't hold back and started crowding forward. Then suddenly they broke through the door and made a race for the plant gates, running in every direction towards the quarter-mile-long buildings." [29]

One group raced to the railroad dock where a plant manager was directing the coupling of loaded cars. "Strike on," yelled the men to the locomotive engineer. "Okay," he nodded, waved to the brakeman to stop the work and trotted off.

The workers inside immediately began to secure the plant against any attacker. They moved scores of unfinished Buick bodies in front of all entrances to form a gigantic barricade. With acetylene torches they welded a steel frame around every door. Bullet-proof metal sheets were put in position to cover every window, while holes were carved in them and threaded to allow the nozzles of fire hoses to be screwed into them. Wet clothes were kept in readiness to be placed on the face as protection against tear-gas attacks. Large supplies of metal parts were placed in strategic spots. Paint guns for spraying would be invaders were located throughout the plant.

The back-to-work whistle blew, but there was no movement. Suddenly the third-floor windows were flung open to reveal workers waving arms and shouting, "Hooray, Bob, she's ours!" The women of the cut-and-sew department were told to report to union headquarters. Nearly all the remaining 3,000 night workers struck.

With a simultaneous sit-down in the smaller Fisher No. 2, GM body production ground to a halt. Thousands of stop-orders went out to suppliers and assembly plants all over the country. On January 1, all Chevrolet and Buick assembly plants were closed. By January 7, 100,000 GM workers were idle. On January 3, a national union conference of 300 from ten cities met in Flint and formulated demands: union recognition for the UAW, reinstatement of all workers fired because of union membership or activity, seniority to govern all layoffs, new wage minimums, a 30-hour, 5-day week with time and one-half for overtime, abolition of piece work, and a slowing down of the assembly line.

The press and the company raved and ranted about a "Soviet-style tyranny" being imposed on the country. The *New York Times* editorialized that it was "highly doubtful whether union leaders were speaking for the great mass of workers." They were striking "for an abstract principle of labor organization in an industry… (in which) earnings were 20% above the average." (January 4, 1937) There were constant references to "Lewis' strike" and Lewis "ordering the men in or out" and "Lewis ordering the strike at strategic points,"[30] as if the rank and file had determined nothing. It continued to whine that a small minority coerces the majority."[31] Headlines were constantly slanted against the strikers: "Ultimatum to Knudson by Auto Union;" "Sloan Bars Pact With 'Dictators.'"[32]

Sloan later reported to the GM stockholders that the sit-down "denies the right of dully constituted branches of government to interfere…It is revolutionary in its dangers and implications."[33]

The workers in Fisher Body No. 1 paid little heed to the rantings of GM and its press. Once inside they set about organizing one of the most effective strike apparatuses ever seen in the United States. Immediately after securing the plant, they held a mass meeting and elected a committee of stewards and a strike strategy committee of five to govern the strike. Bud Simons was elected chairman, and Walter Moore and Joe Devitt, all leaders of the original sit-down on November 13, had central roles on this body. Then committees were organized: food, police, information, sanitation and health, safety, "kangaroo court," entertainment, education and athletics. Since all committees were democratically elected, their authority was unquestioned. The supreme body remained the 1,200 who stayed to hold the plant, the rest being sent outside to perform other tasks. Two meetings of the entire plant were held daily at which any change could be made in the administration.

The strike committee posted rules on all bulletin boards: smoking only in restricted areas, liquor and gambling banned, information given only through the regular committee and no phone calls by individuals. All questions from the press and "outside world" in general had to be written in advance and answered only in the presence of the strike strategy committee.

The police committee was responsible for guarding every entrance to the plant and posted the names and shifts of every man on the bulletin boards. Within this committee of 65 the most trusted workers constituted the Special Patrol. Their job was to make a complete 35-minute round of the plant every hour, 24 hours a day, throughout the entire strike. They would check out all rumors and report any violations of rules or discipline. Violators were tried by the "court" and initially given minor punishments. After three convictions a striker was sent out.

No one could enter or leave the plant unless checked out by the reception committee. One reporter among the hundreds covering the story describes this process:

A "reception committee of five searched my party and car for weapons outside the plant." Then "we walked up to the plant itself. All doors were shut and barricaded. I climbed onto a pile of packing bags and swung over a heavy horizontally-hinged steel door into the plant. On a platform inside there was another reception committee which checked credentials again."[34]

Such care was necessary since the company was always attempting to spread rumors of scandals inside. They even smuggled a prostitute in another guise into the plant but she was discovered and sent packing.

Inside, every worker had a specific duty for six hours a day. They were on duty for three hours, off for nine, on three and off nine, in each 24-hour period. Every day at 3 P.M. there was a general cleanup. No matter how cold the weather, all windows were opened wide and teams of workers moved in waves on, and in between, the assembly lines for the entire length of the plant, leaving it spick-and-span. Personal cleanliness also took high priority, every worker taking a "shower a day."

The strikers divided themselves into social groups of 15, setting up "house" in some cozy corner and living family-style for the "duration." They made mattresses of car cushions, took out the seats and made beds of the car floors. Every visitor was impressed with the extreme neatness and the care taken with all plant property. The spirit and determination that developed among the workers was reflected in letters to their families:

"I don’t know how long we will be here but we **will never** give up. We are holding the fort strong and have everything we need. Cots and cigarettes and plenty of food. We sure done a thing. GM said it could never be done when we took possession…Drop me a line and send my union receipt."

A plant post office was established to handle all mail, which included censoring every letter. Daily visits were arranged whereby workers’ children could be handed through a window while workers talked to their wives as they stood outside. At

one point the organization was so confident of its fortress that workers who lived nearby were allowed the liberty of going home for a day at a time.

The class consciousness and absolute rank-and-file democracy was at a peak during the sit-down, as the following story reveals. A cameraman for Hearst's pro-GM Detroit Times presented his union card to the reception committee but it was torn up. He pleaded to be allowed inside to take pictures and appealed to higher union officials, but was told the plant committee would have to rule on it. A formal debate was held, the cameraman stating his own case, saying he was an "active union man," that he personally differed with his boss, and that "freedom of the press" should be respected. The strikers' view was presented by one worker who simply said, "But goddamitall, his boss is Hearst!" The ballot was unanimous to keep him out.

The monotony and boredom, away from the family, was probably the most difficult problem to overcome. Calisthenics were organized daily. The entire plant was wired with a loudspeaker system. A 12-piece orchestra was organized from among the strikers and concerts were broadcast every evening. Each "social group" had either a radio or phonograph. Ping pong, checkers, chess, cards (using washers as "money") were provided. The bottoms were knocked out of two wastebaskets and a basketball court set up. Boxing and wrestling teams were organized. The strikers took to writing poems and songs, the best of which were published in the union paper. They put on skits lampooning the foremen, GM and its bosses.

Labor classes were held daily in the history of the labor movement and instructions given in parliamentary procedure, "how to run a union meeting" and in the union constitution. A "living newspaper" presented to allow the workers to act out the specific events of the strike as it went along. Dramatic groups were invited and Detroit's Contemporary Theatre put on plays. One local movie owner sent entertainers and another who refused to help out was boycotted after the strike. Charlie Chaplin donated his current movie, *Modern Times*, and film showings were held. A writing class was led by a graduate student from the University of Michigan and workers took to writing plays.

The Women's Auxiliary—which was to play a key role in the strike—organized dancing, representing all national groups, in front of the plant. They formed "living formations" or mass charades to describe phrases like "Solidarity Forever" or "Sole Collective Bargaining Agent." The strikers, in turn, serenaded them with their own band, whose theme song became "The Fisher Strike," written by the workers to the tune of the well-known southern ballad, "The Martins and the McCoys."

Gather round me and I'll tell you all a story,
Of the Fisher Body Factory Number One:
When the dies they started moving,
The union men they had a meeting,
To decide right then and there what must be done.

Chorus

These four-thousand union boys,
Oh, they sure made lots of noise,
They decided then and there to shut down tight.
In the office they got snooty,
So we started picket duty,
Now the Fisher Body shop is on a strike.

Now this strike it started one bright Wednesday evening,
When they loaded up a box car full of dies;

When the union boys they stopped them
And the railroad workers backed them,
The officials in the office were surprised.

Now they really started out to strike in earnest.
They took possession of the gates and buildings too.
They placed a guard in either clockhouse
Just to keep the non-union men out,
And they took the keys and locked the gates up too.

Now you think that this union strike is ended,
And they'll all go back to work just as before.
But the day shift men are "cuties,"
They relieve the night shift duties,
And we carry on this strike just as before.[35]

The organization outside the plant was no less efficient and vital to the existence of the workers inside. Union headquarters .at Pengelly Hall was the hub. Committees were established for food preparation, publicity, welfare and relief, pickets and defense and union growth. The responsibility of feeding several thousand workers both inside and outside the plants was enormous. The union kitchen was headed by Dorothy Kraus, wife of the union editor, and a union chef from a large Detroit hotel. One day's food supply included 500 pounds of meat, 100 pounds of potatoes, 300 loaves of bread, 100 pounds of coffee, 200 pounds of sugar, 30 gallons of milk and four cases of evaporated milk. Its transportation was handled by the city's bus drivers who remembered the solidarity of the auto workers in the bus strike. Two hundred people, mostly women, prepared this food. Some crates of fruit were kept inside for snacks and carefully guarded against poisoning. As it later turned out, a Pinkerton agent was on the inside food committee.

Several hundred workers gave their cars for use by the union. Sound equipment, guarded day and night, was used to talk to the sit-downers from outside the plant. The *Flint Auto Worker* was distributed by the tens of thousands. A "chiseling" committee was set up to collect food and supplies. Two-thirds of what was needed was obtained in this fashion, the committee going from house to house and to small shopkeepers.

The union headquarters became the center of life for thousands of workers who streamed in and out, bringing their families along. A nursery was set up to take care of the children while their mothers were working for the strike.

There was constant communication between the outside strike leaders and the strike committee inside. Picketing took place around the, clock in front of the plant.

The fantastic spirit and organization of the workers spread across the nation. Sit-downs became a national phenomenon. Workers the country over grabbed newspapers each day to see "if the boys in Flint were still holding out." Companion strikes sparked new methods of organization.* Only one reason could drag one sit-downer at the Philadelphia Exide Battery Co. outside—he was married at the plant gates. The entire country was union-conscious, A milk company inserted an advertisement in the Daily Worker saying:

"We take great pleasure In announcing that we have signed a closed shop contract with the Milk Wagon Drivers Union, Local 584. Now our milk will be delivered by UNION DRIVERS!"

Support poured in from all over the country. Despite the attempt of the national AFL to sabotage the strike, Its city central bodies in Flint, Detroit, Cleveland and Minneapolis backed the sit-downers with all sorts of aid.

The United Rubber Workers' Goodyear local sent $3,000. Six thousand came from UAW at Studebaker. Trucks of food arrived from Akron. The Hudson and Chrysler workers began , a "one-hour-a-day club;" one hour's wages each day donated to the strike fund. Veterans formed a Union Labor Post No. 1 to counteract the "patriotic scabbing" organized by flag-wavers. Even small businessmen joined the ranks, one drugstore owner telling a reporter:

"This whole block of stores is solid for the union. Hell, I never got anything out of GM dividends: a union victory is better for my business."[36]

Based on the coordination inside and outside, the sit-downers felt as if they were building up an impregnable fortress against the company and police. They were not to wait too long be-fore the first attack was launched.

As production decreased daily, GM turned to their courts for an injunction with which to oust the strikers. It was a ticklish legal situation, since the workers were in no way harming the machinery, and, in fact, kept the plants in better shape than the company had. The tactic was "so new," said one observer, "that no existing law has any relevance in regard to it."[37] But that, of course, wouldn't stop GM.

It got an, injunction from Genesee County Judge Edward D. Black. County Sheriff Tom Wolcott went to the plants to read it to the workers, ordering them out in 24 hours. As the nervous sheriff stood on a table in the Fisher No. I cafeteria reading the writ, workers laughed and kidded him and broke out into "Solidarity Forever" when he had finished. Needless to say, the workers refused to budge.

With GM set to request an order for removal, one of the union attorneys dug up information which proved to be a bombshell: Judge Black owned 3,665 shares of GM stock, worth $219,000.[38] Michigan law stated that "No judge of any court shall sit as such in any case or proceeding in which he is a party or, in which he is interested…" While the judge denied that his stock ownership would influence his decision, this was too blatant even for GM. Shamefaced, it forgot the Black injunction and allowed legal matters to cool awhile before seeking another one.

This exposure proved a boon to the workers' cause as it hit the front pages of every paper in the country and exposed GM's complete control of the political machinery of Flint. But the company had just started.

All of a sudden there appeared on the scene an organization called the Flint Alliance. It claimed to be composed of "loyal" GM workers who were laid off in other plants because of the Fisher Body strike and who were demanding an end to "minority rule." The president of this group turned out to be one George Boyson, a former Buick paymaster and then owner of a company manufacturing spark plugs—obviously loyal to GM. The treasurer was revealed as a former Flint city official who had been convicted of embezzling city funds. So "widespread" was the "anger" among the "loyal workers" that these two, were picked as the main officers of the Flint Alliance!

In reality, the Alliance was set up both as a strikebreaking group and to mobilize vigilante action against the sit-downers. It was composed principally of GM supervisors, of which there were hundreds, and businessmen. Foremen descended on non-struck plants with membership cards, attempting to intimidate workers into signing. Several received a "going over" when they refused to join. More than half the cards were filled out with "names" such as "John Fink" and "James Stoolpigeon" or "Strikebreaker" and "Mr. Sloan," with the comment added, "I own General Motors and its employees."

GM took pictures of "crowds" of workers supposedly demonstrating to go back to work. The "demonstrators" later turned out to be men waiting for their paychecks. The company was pushing its back-to-work movement through the Flint Alliance, claiming that a minority of strikers were "dictating" to a majority of non-strikers. Actually the union was signing

up thousands of men and women into the UAW every day. Even those workers who were not on strike and not in the union let it be known, by their presence at demonstrations and picket lines, that their sympathies were with the sit-downers.

GM continued its refusal even to meet with the union unless the strikers vacated the plants. And, of course, the union said they would not do so unless guaranteed that the company would not fill them with scabs, a pledge which GM would never agree to. The tension mounted. Cries were heard in Congress for outlawing sit-down strikes. A Detroit clergyman saw "Soviet planning" behind the strike. The AFL leadership urged the workers to go back to work.

But the workers, marvelously organized and in high spirits, sat tight. So GM finally turned to violence.

THE BATTLE OF BULLS RUN

On the afternoon of January 11, as workers were handing food in through the main gate of Fisher Body No. 2, company guards suddenly appeared and overpowered them, closing the gate of the smaller plant. The workers quickly ran up a ladder to hoist the food to the second floor, but the guards hauled it down. At that moment, in 16 degree weather, the company turned off the heat.

Word was sent to union headquarters and hundreds of workers raced to the scene. Some were from Buick and Chevy, some were bus drivers who had been helped by the auto workers during their recent strike, some were "flying squads" in town from Toledo and Norwood, Ohio, to help out. The ever-present sound truck appeared in front of the plant. Immediately 20 outside pickets, Fisher No. 2 workers, advanced on the company guards with home-made billy clubs, took their keys and captured the gate, to guard against city cops entering. The company guards phoned the Flint cops and ran to the plant's ladies' room where they barricaded themselves and claimed they were kidnapped. It became obvious that the whole provocation had been prearranged.

The cops arrived in minutes, loaded down with revolvers, gas guns, grenades and supplies of tear and nauseating gas. They blockaded the streets, removed parked cars and then attacked the pickets guarding the gate. Women pickets deposited their children at the union hall and raced to the plant.

When the first gas bombs were thrown, the pickets outside retreated temporarily. The wind blew the gas back into the cops' ranks. Inside the plant the sit-downers dragged fire hoses to the windows and began directing streams of water at the advancing cops. Two-pound door hinges began raining down from the roof. Within five minutes, the cops retreated.

The sit-downers started hauling out a supply of empty milk bottles and hinges to the pickets outside, preparing for a second attack. The cops began hurling gas bombs through the plant windows, which were not as well fortified as at Fisher No. 1. The workers grabbed them with gloved hands and quickly doused them in buckets of water located nearby for that purpose.

The cops then regrouped and made a second rush but were met with a volley of bottles, hinges and lumps of coal outside and water from the inside hoses. They couldn't get close this time. The sound truck, manned by several organizers, was helping to direct the battle amid a barrage of tear gas. Again the cops retreated, this time with the workers in hot pursuit. The counter-attack was led by Travis, who was later treated for gas burns. The pickets were joined by scores of other workers who were part of a crowd watching the battle.

At that point the cops opened fire. Fourteen were wounded, one, a leader of the bus drivers' union, critically. While fellow workers carried them off, the rest continued on the attack, overturning the sheriff's car (with the sheriff inside) and spilling large quantities of gas and gas grenades out of the trunk. The cops continued to retreat up the hill, shooting at the windows of the plant.

One woman, Genora Johnson, whose husband was inside the plant, grabbed the mike in the sound truck and cried:

"Cowards! Cowards! Shooting unarmed and defenseless men! Women of Flint! This is your fight! Join the picket line and defend your jobs, your husband's job and your children' s home."[39]

As the cops stayed on top of the hill, men and women began to organize an all-night vigil. Victor Reuther, manning the sound truck, pointed out that it was not the peaceful workers but GM's cops who were responsible for the destruction. He told the workers that "they must now fight not only for their jobs but for their very lives. Let General Motors be warned; the patience of these men is not inexhaustible. If there is further bloodshed…we will not be responsible for what the workers do in their rage! There are costly machines in that plant. Let the corporation and their thugs remember that!"[40]

The workers outside barricaded both ends of the plant with abandoned cars. Gov. Frank Murphy arrived in Flint and said he was holding the National Guard "in readiness." But GM's strategy had failed, for the moment. Attempting to counteract the character of a peaceful sit-down, it had provoked violence at Fisher No. 2, much smaller than its sister plant. It wanted to create a situation whereby the Guard would be ordered in and martial law declared. Its hope was to starve out the workers and eventually evict them, thereby giving impetus to a back-to-work' movement led by the Flint Alliance.

The courage, organization and solidarity of the workers had overcome this strategy. The "Battle of Bulls Run," as it later came to be known, had ended. The "bulls" had run.

The next day, January 12, 8,000 workers massed in front of Fisher No. 2 to celebrate the victory. No cops were in sight as they poured in from Lansing, Detroit, Pontiac, Saginaw, Toledo, Cleveland, South Bend. and Norwood to visit the scene of the battle. Thousands were signing up in the UAW every day. Fisher No. 1 shored up its defenses against the mobilization of 1,500 National Guardsmen. The huge crane whistle was set to blow at the first sign of attack. The boiler was adjusted at full force to hurl water at an invader. One hose was attached to an air line to blow away possible gas fumes. Workers were practicing heaving the two-pound door hinges at beaverboard targets. Morale was high, especially since many felt Murphy would not use the Guard against the strikers, that he was on their side.

GM had claimed that the battle had been between the cops and the workers; the corporation had "nothing to do with it." But still GM had seven of the wounded men arrested when they were released from the hospital. The very next day, 1,200 "John Doe" warrants were made out to be served on the strikers, charging them with "criminal syndicalism, felonious assault, riot, destruction of property and kidnapping." The last charge was based on the company guards who had run to the women's room..

One of the results of the victory of Bulls Run was the new importance it gave to women in the strike. Up to that time, though joining outside picket lines, most had been involved in preparing food. Many wives of sit-downers had been the victims of malicious anonymous letters telling them their husbands inside the plant were sick. Some women were tricked into demanding that their husbands and sons be brought home. But Bulls Run turned the tide.

Genora Johnson, who had spoken out so militantly in the heat of the battle, began organizing the Women's Emergency Brigade, as a vanguard detachment of the Women's Auxiliary. It was composed of volunteers, mostly veterans of the previous battle, organized along semi-military lines. Squad captains (usually those with phones and cars) were leaders of groups of women whom they were expected to roundup for any emergency on a moment's notice and transport to the scene of action. One failure to respond meant suspension from the Brigade.

Mrs. Johnson, 23, told them they should expect to face tear gas and bullets on the picket line...be beaten and killed by

police attacks" and by "attempts to break the strike." Applications poured in. The Brigade began wearing red berets and armbands to identify themselves as they prepared to answer any attack.

"If we go into battle, will we be armed?" Mrs. Johnson asked. "Yes." she said, "with rolling pins, brooms, mops and anything we can get.." They began carrying long "two-by-fours" whittled down at one end for easy handling. The members of the Brigade were described by Mary Heaton Vorse, noted women's leader of the day, as "strikers' wives and mothers, normally 'homebodies,' mature women, the majority married, ranging from young mothers to grandmothers."[41] Mrs. Vorse remarked that the women were "doing this because they have come to the conclusion it must be done if they and their children are to have a decent life."

The workers began holding mass meetings, bombarding Governor Murphy with reminders of his election promises, demanding that no troops be used against the strikers. Although Murphy had raised the National Guard complement to 3,000, acting on an "unlawful seizure" definition of the strike, he was extremely wary about appearing to be taking sides. He declared that the troops were there as much to protect against the vigilante Flint Alliance as against violence from the strikers. Some Guardsmen, workers themselves, wore union buttons, vowing they wouldn't allow themselves to be used as strikebreakers. Murphy was "the man in the middle," trying to bring about a settlement without harming his political future. He had just been elected by an overwhelming workers' vote two months before.

With the help of the CIO' s Phillip Murray, an end was being sought to the glass industry strike, which would enable Chrysler and Ford production to shoot back up. This would put pressure on GM, where production had sunk from 50,000 to 1,500 cars per week. The union took the offensive. CIO president Lewis launched a broadside against the corporation, demanding an investigation of its ownership. He pledged full CIO support until the auto workers won their strike, realizing the noticeable effect it was having on the steel organizing campaign. Flying squads of organizers were signing up thousands of steel workers into the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee.

On January 13, Murphy called both sides into conference and two days later GM agreed to a truce. National bargaining would begin on the l8th—solely with the UAW—-on all eight issues. Seventeen struck plants would remain closed pending a settlement. There would be no discrimination against any worker because of union membership. Neither side could break off negotiations for at least 15 days. The sit-downers would evacuate the plants before the 18th but GM would not remove tools, dies or materials from any of the struck plants. The key issue was that the UAW would be the sole bargaining agent.

The rank-and-file sit-downers didn't like the smell of it, although GM had finally been forced to sip something. (Prior to that the corporation said they would not even negotiate unless the plants were evacuated first, and had always maintained that the UAW only represented a small "minority.") Travis and the Flint leadership had not been involved in the negotiations leading to this agreement and didn't like it either. They felt it put GM on the offensive again, since with every passing day in the 15-day period there would be increasing pressure on the union to accept less and less of what it wanted before GM would be able to break off negotiations. Travis pointed out that the strike was built around the occupation of the plants and to evacuate them without a contract would appear to be backing down. Adding to these misgivings was the fact that Travis, Kraus and two Reuther brothers (Roy and Victor) were arrested just at that time for "unlawful assembly" (because of their leadership at Bulls Run). Despite this, the union kept its end of the bargain. Guide Lamp in Anderson, Indiana was evacuated first (and the outside pickets were attacked immediately afterwards by vigilantes); then came Cadillac and Fleetwood on Detroit's West Side, marching out with banners flying, "Today GM, Tomorrow Ford!"*

For the rank and file it "was difficult to accept a truce"[42] rather than definite victory and outright union recognition. Nevertheless, plans were made for Fisher Nos. 1 and 2 to march out in a body on Sunday, January 17, after a special chicken dinner inside. Everything was cleaned up, the workers had their bags packed and Fisher No. 1 was about ready to parade to the buses that would take them to No. 2 for a mass demonstration when the hitch came.

Bill Lawrence, a United Press reporter, happened to hand Henry Kraus a press release which he had taken from George Boyson's desk, and asked for the union's comment. The release, scheduled for issuance after the evacuation of the plants, announced that GM had agreed to meet with the Flint Alliance on Tuesday to discuss "representation" and recognition by the company. This was a direct violation of the agreement to bargain solely with the UAW. Travis sent runners immediately to both body plants to halt the evacuations while the workers discussed the new turn of events. Although UAW president Martin, when notified, saw "nothing wrong" in the development, CIO director Brophy and Vice-President Mortimer agreed with Travis' move.

When the proposal was made to remain inside Fisher No. 1, the workers cheered. A roaring crowd of 5,000 outside applauded wildly when they heard the decision ten minutes after the sit-downers had been scheduled to leave. Horns honked for five minutes as the men lined the windows of the plant, waving to their fami1ies and fellow strikers. A dummy figure labeled "GM stoolpigeon" was lowered to the ground and torn to shreds. Another rally of 10,000 at Fisher No. 2 also cheered Mortimer's announcement that the sit-downers had decided to stick it out in the face of GM's doublecross.

There was a victory air at Pengelly Hall. "The strike and the union had suddenly attained full maturity."[43] The workers felt GM couldn't bargain with two unions—"You can't have an eight-hour shift on one end of an assembly line and six on another."

GM then walked out of the negotiations and the workers tightened their lines once more. It was back to scratch again.

On January 20, all Buick plants were forced to close. New negotiations were undertaken in Washington at Roosevelt's request. However, GM quit those parleys two days later and, with production virtually at a standstill, vowed to reopen its struck plants. At that point Lewis demanded that Roosevelt enforce collective bargaining under the law and force GM to negotiate. Roosevelt refused to do this, answering: "I think in the interests of peace there come moments when statements, conversations and headlines are not in order."[44]

GM chose to interpret these remarks as a go-ahead signal to open a strike-breaking drive. Economic conditions were worsening, a time when anti-strike movements flourish. While the UAW was fighting to relieve these hardships by getting relief for its members, and was signing up new members all the time, the corporation launched its drive.

It announced that 79 per cent of its workers had "voted to return to work." Since GM was very "concerned" about its workers, it would "make work" for them and get them off welfare. On the 25th the union answered this with a strike in the Oakland plant, one of the few places where actual assembly work was taking place.

On that same day Boyson announced that the Flint Alliance would "take an active part in efforts to reopen the plants." On the 26th GM refused to attend a meeting called by Secretary of Labor Perkins In Washington, which Roosevelt termed "unfortunate."[45] Then the company launched an all-out drive to break the strike.

Vigilantes smashed UAW headquarters at Anderson, Indiana and ran the union organizers out of town. Five pickets were clubbed by cops on a line in front of the Cadillac plant in Detroit. Mrs. Agnes Gotten, wife of a striker, sought to block police from escorting scabs inside and was clubbed from behind, requiring five stitches in her head. But 1,500 pickets succeeded in preventing any strikebreakers from entering, despite the presence of 200 hose-carrying cops. The Flint Alliance met to whip up a frenzy against the strikers.

The state legislature sponsored a bill to outlaw sit-down strikes. The Alliance besieged four union officials in Saginaw and beat them up, nearly murdering them. Finally, on the 27th, GM reopened non-struck plants, mostly in Chevrolet, employing 40,000 workers. Although it had actually closed them prematurely, to throw workers on the street and blame the UAW for their plight, it was now opening them with no real chance of assembling cars. About all that could be done was to build up

an inventory of parts. Travis felt, however, that it wasn't the worst thing for a lot of laid-off members to be working as long as the body plants were closed and GM couldn't start actual production.

But the corporation wasn't content with these counter-moves. It sought out a judge who didn't own GM stock and filed for an injunction, on grounds—true, of course—that it was losing money to Ford and Chrysler. It demanded immediate evacuation of the Fisher Body plants and prohibition of outside picketing. On February 1st the union was served with a show-cause order to explain why it should not bow to the injunction. On the same day a march to Saginaw protesting the beating of the four union officials was countermanded by national UAW headquarters at Murphy's request. Travis, angry, pointed out that Murphy could have protected the officials but didn't.

GM had effectively seized the offensive: it had reopened its non-striking plants, and the union appeared powerless to prevent it. Having passed its peak, the union would inevitably fall back and grow weaker, with the chance that the strike might be lost or demands watered down beyond recognition, unless a counter-offensive were launched. That is exactly what Travis and the strikers produced.

THE CAPTURE OF CHEVY 4

Across Chevrolet Avenue from Fisher Body No. 2, spread out on 80 acres and bisected by the Flint River, stood nine Chevrolet factories. At 3:30 every afternoon 7,000 night-shift workers replaced the 7,000 on the day shift. Half of the 14,000 total worked in one factory—Chevy No. 4, the motor assembly plant which produced all one million Chevrolet engines each year. It was the largest single unit of the GM empire. To seize it would remove the struggle from the courts and put it back in the plants where the workers had an even chance. Yet, to capture it appeared nearly impossible.

The plant superintendent, storm trooper Arnold Lenz, had instituted a reign of terror. He had concentrated an army of armed guards inside to patrol day and night. The union was growing, and Lenz was firing workers left and right for union activities.

As it happened, the union had uncovered a Pinkerton agent, "Frenchy" DuBuc, and was holding and using him to get information. Travis ordered the stoolie to call his Pinkerton boss and tell him that Travis had asked him directly about Chevy No.4—about the docks, the approaches, whether or not a boat could be brought up the Flint River to the plant, etc.

The Pinkerton boss told DuBuc that Travis was kidding him. "He knows goddamn well the union couldn't take Chevy 4"[46] Thus Travis established in his own mind that GM was confident the union would not be so foolhardy as to try to sit down in No. 4.

Lenz fired three more men for union activities on Friday, January 29. Travis called a Chevrolet membership meeting for Sunday night and 1, 500 workers responded. He told them the situation, outlined the goon attacks, and said the union must demand that the UAW members be rehired. The meeting roared approval. He then told the workers to "keep your eyes open" and "you'll know what to do." The meeting was adjourned, but 150 stewards and organizers were told to remain. Travis, Kraus and Roy Reuther went into a nearby darkened room, lighted only by a candle. The men were told to enter one by one. As they did, the three-man committee selected 30 of the "most trusted," sending the rest home with slips of paper containing "secret orders:" "follow the man who takes the lead."

The 30 who remained were told that at exactly 3:20 the next afternoon there would be a sit-down in Chevy NINE. Those in Chevy plants Nos. 4 and 6 were told to sit tight and remain at work, not to help out at No. 9. When some voiced objections to striking No. 9, they were satisfied with the answer that No. 9 was stronger in union membership and "easier to defend."

Travis then took aside the two most trusted union leaders from No. 9 and told them that they had to hold the plant just until 4:10, until Chevy No. 6 was "taken," that No. 6 was the "real target." Meanwhile Travis had told three leaders from No. 6 and No. 4—Ed Cronk, Howard Foster and Kermit Johnson—that No. 9 was only to be used as a decoy; that Cronk in No. 6 was to rally his men and then take them over to No. 4 and help the other two pull it down. Thus, only six people—Travis, Kraus, Reuther, Cronk, Foster and Johnson—knew that No. 4 was the actual target.

But what about the armed camp in No. 4? Reuther and Kraus told Travis they were a bit dubious about some of the 30 "select few" he had picked to tell about the plan to take No. 9. They said they were sure the information would get back to Lenz through at least one stoolie. That, Travis said, was precisely what he wanted. He felt that whatever these 30 men were told would be all over the company in the morning. The only way to defeat the company's stoolpigeon system was to use it—to go through an intricate, elaborate "secret" procedure, with "darkened rooms," "secret orders" on slips of paper, and the rest.

In this way, when the few "dubious" choices among the 30 brought the news back to Lenz about Chevy No. 9 being the target, Travis reasoned, the "super" would believe it, first, because of the extreme measures taken to keep it a secret, and second because Lenz and the Pinkertons were sure the union would never make an attempt to capture the "impregnable" No. 4. Travis was counting on the GM spy system to give the company the wrong information. In this manner No. 9 was set up as a decoy to draw all the company guards away from No. 4 and allow its seizure by the workers.

The next afternoon, February 1, at the very moment the hearings were taking place in court on GM's new injunction bid, Travis called a mass meeting at the union hall, billed as a mobilization for a "protest march" on the courthouse. Thousands showed up and the Women's Emergency Brigade appeared in force. Meanwhile the union sound trucks circled the city, surrounded by union guards, and finally, through devious routes, at 3:05 came to rest facing Nos. 9 and 6.

Five minutes later at the union hall Dorothy Kraus rushed up to Travis "breathlessly" and handed him a slip of paper. Travis turned grimly to the crowd gathered to march to the courthouse and said "They're beating up our boys at Chevy Nine. I suggest we go right down there." Unknown to the workers, the slip of paper was blank.

The crowd made a mad rush for the stairs and outside a long line of cars was waiting with motors running. The workers were at No. 9 in a few minutes. Newsmen, who had been "tipped off" earlier, were already there. And, sure enough, there was "trouble."

Lenz had fallen into the trap completely. The entire armed force from the whole Chevrolet division had been stationed at the personnel building next to No. 9. At 3:20, when the night shift marched in yelling "Strike"' the guards closed the doors and rushed in, with Lenz in the lead, shouting "Reds! Communists!" The outnumbered workers fought valiantly. When one woman saw her husband's bloody head gasping for air at an open window she yelled to the "red berets," "They're smothering them! Let's give them air." The women proceeded methodically to break all the windows in the plant. One of the women later described the scene:

"They were fighting inside and outside the plant. The fighting would have been much worse if it hadn't been for us. We walked right along with our flag at our head. The gas floated right out towards us. But we have been gassed before and we went right on.

"We had to break the windows… to get air to the boys who were being gassed inside. We just want to protect our husbands and we are going to."[48]

When the whistle blew at 3:30, the fighting was at its fiercest. The men were using anything they could lay their hands on

against the goons' clubs and gas guns. At 3:45 the plant manager at No. 4 ran down the lines tapping all the company men and ordering them over to No. 9 leaving No. 4 virtually devoid of any pro-company force. Finally at 4:10, the two inside leaders, Ted La Duke and Tom Klasey, figured they had "done our job" and ordered the men to march out, bleeding and "defeated." The injunction was still being argued at the court.

Then, as Kraus describes it, in "crankshafts" Gib Rose "reached up and pulled the switch and conveyor A-1 was dead. This was the signal for Dow Kehler who headed conveyor A-2. In five seconds she was down too. Kelly Malone… pulled the switch on conveyor A-3 and the entire division was frozen."

Many workers, being "threatened" with dismissal by foremen and straw bosses, wavered as union men marched around shouting: "Strike is on'! Come on and help us!" As the number of strikers grew, "courage added to courage." There was practically no physical violence… Kelly Malone, with wrench in hand (went) tearing down the lines and yelling: "Get off your job, you dirty scab!" Yet he never touched a man—all melted with fright before him."[50]

Soon the strikers were hundreds strong. "Everywhere at key conveyors, squads of union men were stationed. Others were set to guard gates and mount lookout." With several departments still to be shut, "the united union forces… like a swarm of locusts passed among the machines, leaving silence and inertness where they went."[51]

When the foremen tried to regroup and one official urged the more passive workers to retake the plant "Joe Sayen ran perilously along the narrow balcony railing and leaping to a cafeteria table right in the midst of the listeners began shouting to drown the plant official out." The foremen retreated to the superintendent's office and locked the door, but Cronk and his men broke it open and told them, "You've got five minutes to get out!" One official tried to call for reinforcements but Cronk pushed him aside and ripped the phone from the wall. The company men fled.

"The fight was over; the enormous plant was dead. The vast complex with its dizzying profusion of conveyors and machines was sprawled out like a wounded giant. The unionists were in complete control. Everywhere they were speaking to undecided workers.

" ' We want you boys to stay with us,. It won't be long and everything will be settled. Then we'll have a union and things will be different.'

"Many of the workers reached their decision in this moment. Others went home, undeterred by the strikers. About two thousand remained and an equal number went off. But as they left… the majority of them, following an impulse of incipient solidarity, dropped their lunches into huge gondolas, half filling several of them with what proved to be a much needed extra supply of food."[52]

When, at about 4:15, they "had driven the foremen out, they began barricading the plant exits… The plant guards returning from Chevy 9 after the battle tried to enter by the northeast gate but the men drove them off with pistons, connecting rods and rocker arm rods while others brought fire hoses and squirted water and foamite at the would-be invaders."[53]

By this time pickets and a sound truck came over from Fisher No. 2 across Chevrolet Avenue. A member of the Women's Emergency Brigade jumped to the mike and reported that the women from Chevy No. 9's battle "have gone to the auxiliary hall to wipe their eyes clear of the tear gas and will soon be back. We don't want violence… but we are going to protect our husbands."[54]

Soon down the hill they came, a procession of women hundreds strong in bright red caps, singing "Hold the Fort for we are coming…" They spread out in front of the plant gates, amid cheers from the men inside and the watching crowd, and

locked arms. If any cops or troops were to attempt to break into the plant, it was plain they would first have to go over these women's bodies. Not one attempt was made as the women entrenched themselves, preparing to stay the night.

Inside the plant, workers were busily filling huge gondola cars with stock, parts and weights. Then electric trucks were hitched to them and dragged the 8,000-pound loads against the rear doors. A crane was used to lift a second layer of loaded gondolas on top of the first and then still a third layer was hoisted into place. At 4:45 P.M. on February 1, Chevrolet plant No. 4, producer of a million motors a year, largest unit in the world-wide General Motors empire, "impregnable" against attack, had been secured by the men of the UAW-CIO. The women were standing in front of them, daring any cop, company goon or National Guardsman to retake it. The brilliant plan conceived by Travis and the ingenuity and heroism of the strikers had stabbed at the very heart of the billion-dollar auto giant.

As darkness descended, Joe Sayen, who shortly before had acted so heroically inside the plant, climbed the fence and addressed the throng:

" We want the whole world to understand what we are fighting for. We are fighting for freedom and life and liberty. This is our one great opportunity. What if we should be defeated? What if we should be killed? We have only one life. That's all we can lose and we might as well die like heroes than like slaves."[55]

On the 34th day of the great Flint sit-down, the workers had once again taken the offensive.

The GM "back-to-work movement had been stopped in its tracks. Murphy was furious. Negotiations had been "wrecked," he said. Privately, he had "violently castigated" the use of the sit-down tactic.[56] He ordered troops into the area around Chevy No. 4. They were partly under the command of Captain Henry McNaughton, who had served in the U.S. force that had invaded the Soviet Union after World War I. The troops took possession of all streets and approaches, isolating both the Chevy plant and Fisher Body No. 2 across the street. Virtual martial law was declared. Guards with fixed bayonets surrounded No. 4. Eight machine guns and 37 mm. howitzers were mounted on the hill overlooking both plants. Tear gas was held in reserve. No one was allowed into the plants, which effectively shut off the food supply. Fisher No. 2 was completely sealed off from both union contact and from visits by the strikers' families. The National Guard was upped to 2,300 and finally to 4,000. An injunction signed by Judge Gladola on February 2 ordered the workers to abandon the plants or face "ejection" in 24 hours. The writ also forbade street picketing. The Women's Emergency Brigade was forced out of the area.

Then the heat was shut off in the two plants. The workers immediately threatened to start huge bonfires to warm themselves. On went the heat. Next the lights were shut. Again the workers warned that every one of the 3,000 men now inside would light a torch of waste paper in order to "see." On went the lights. On February 3 the National Guard was forced to lift the food ban, under dire threats of "damage" inside the plants. The lunches left by those workers who had not stayed in Chevy Four proved invaluable during those first two days.

This war of nerves was too much for GM. With hundreds of millions of dollars worth of machinery at stake, on February 4 it agreed to resume negotiations. By agreeing to talk while the workers remained in possession of the plants, the corporation was making a fundamental concession. Earlier it had refused to negotiate unless the plants were evacuated.

On February 7 Lewis joined the talks in Detroit, along with Mortimer and attorney Lee Pressman. Mortimer replaced Martin who had been sent on tour to prevent him from fouling up the negotiations. The union reduced its "recognition" demand to one of sole bargaining agent in the 20 struck plants, which included the key ones, and agent for its members only in the rest.

Meanwhile, the AFL continued its treachery. Having previously wired GM its support, and labeled the strike a "defeat," it

now "demanded" that the company reopen its plants. Its own craft members had "never voted" for a strike, whined the AFL "leaders," and therefore they were being "ordered" back to work. Cleveland's Fisher Body plant had six AFL members. When Lewis was asked what effect this "order" might have on the strike he replied, "Did that man go back to work?"[57]

AFL President William Green had reportedly received a promise from Roosevelt that the President would not intervene in the strike on behalf of the CIO.[58] Now Green asked GM not to recognize the UAW. This AFL scabbing had about as much effect on the UAW as a worm attempting to stop a Mack truck.*

The tension continued to mount. The sheriff read the injunction order to the sit-downers, demanding they leave the plants. After the workers refused, he asked Murphy for aid in ousting them and arresting their leaders.** By now Fisher No. 1—-free from Guard patrol, two miles from the besieged plants—had 3, 000 men on the inside. Murphy kept holding off, hoping he could get an agreement and maintain an untarnished image. But the company forces would not let him rest easily.

City officials continued to recruit vigilantes. By February 8 there existed an armed force of 4,000 National Guardsmen, 1,000 deputized vigilantes, the Flint cops and the Flint. Alliance, all "ready to move." The Michigan Sheriff's Association offered 1,300 additional deputies.

The vigilantes were being put through "dress rehearsals" by the sheriff and city officials. Plans were discussed about how to oust the strikers. Many of these forces were among the lesser lights in the company scheme of things and felt a UAW victory would mean the end of their "cut of the pie."

The question arose among the union strategists of what to do in case of a full-scale attack. Initially, when the Guard had surrounded the two plants, Walter Reuther (who had come aver from Detroit where he headed the West Side Local 174) "felt that the workers should be told not to resist the Guards actively but to sprawl out on the floors and force the troops to carry them bodily out of the plant."[59] Kraus and others had disagreed with this idea. When "passive resistance" or a "short protest and then surrender" proposal was raised again, Travis shot back:

'You' re not going to tell workers to fight five minutes and then stop… They've either got to fight or give in—there's no two ways about it. Well, suppose we tell them not to fight because it's impossible defeating such a superior force? Do you know what will happen? They'll march out of those plants like whipped dogs. Not all the talk in the world afterwards is going to change that. By taking the plants away from those boys now it would mean tearing the heart right out of them."[60]

The strike leader then declared that "we've got to tell them to be prepared to fight… I don't think it'll ever come to that point because Governor Murphy isn't going to be responsible for bloodshed at this late date. But the only way to assure that is to take the attitude that we won't surrender to *anybody*. We fought the cops, we fought the company thugs and we can fight the National Guard, too, the way we did in Toledo… (author's emphasis) No one challenged this strategy.

Rumors spread that an attack was imminent, that Murphy would finally use the Guard. Inside Fisher Body No. 2, one worker, Francis O'Rourke, had been keeping a day-by-day diary:

"Injunction has been granted and Sheriff Wolcott is coming down to take us out. We're not coming out. Waiting, waiting, waiting, won't he ever come.? We can't get news from the outside and can't get news out. It's nerve wracking. Just waiting for the sheriff and wondering when we go into action. I hope none of us get hurt. All good men, they are and don't want violence. We're not coming out though…"

Inside Fisher No. 1, 3,000 workers were preparing for the worst. Daily drills were being held, with an "Officer of the Day"

in command in case of attack. A certain crane whistle was to signal a call to arms. Everyone had his orders. Four men were to attach each hose to the openings in the sheet-metal plates, already fitted with nozzles in place. Water was kept at full pressure at all times. On February 5 a shanty with pickets inside was placed over a nearby manhole cover, guarding the on1y spot from which the city water supply could be turned off. Foamite guns mounted on two wheels, resembling cannon, were rolled into place. Although banned, there were some rifles and revolvers on hand. The ventilators were plugged to prevent gas from being poured in through them.

A majority' of the strikers signed up in a fight-to-the-death committee. Their plan was to battle any attacker on a floor-to-floor basis, right up to the roof. They felt they could hold out indefinitely. A two-week supply of canned food had been shifted upstairs. On February 2, the men in bath Fisher Body plants then sent wires to Murphy:

"…The police of the city of Flint belong to General Motors. The sheriff of Genesee County belongs to General Motors, The judges of Genesee County belong to General Motors.... It remains to be seen whether the governor of the State also belongs to General Motors. Governor, we have decided to stay in the plant. We have no illusions about the sacrifices which this decision will entail. We fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us many of us will be killed and we take this means of making it known to our wives, to our children, to the people of the state of Michigan and the country, that if this result follows from the attempt to eject us, you are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths!"[63]

That was the answer of the strikers inside. Outside, the preparations were no less militant. Travis had requested mass assistance for a possible showdown. Locals in his Toledo home base immediately began sending five hundred to a thousand men ready to remain in Flint at least an entire week. Auto-Lite and other plants shut down because so many workers had left their jobs to go to the aid of their brothers and sisters in Flint. Cars were streaming in from all over Michigan. Thousands of workers were pouring over the roads leading from Detroit to the embattled workers. Ten thousand came from that. city's Dodge and Chrysler plants alone. Kelsey-Hayes had to shut its doors because its workers were marching to Fisher Body. And 20,000 of Flint's own had begun massing at the two Body plants. Chevy No. 4 had been captured after the injunction had been issued, and therefore was not included in the ouster order.

The union declared February 3 "Women's Day." Hundreds of women began arriving from Detroit, Toledo, Lansing, and Pontiac. The Flint Women's Emergency Brigade started massing 5,000 women for the occasion.

The women decided to demonstrate right in the heart of Flint. Parading with their children they carried signs reading: "We Stand by Our Heroes in the Plants;" "Our Daddies Fight for Us Little Tykes." As the deadline neared the women marched to Fisher No. 1, merging with the thousands already there and encircled the entire length and breadth of the plant, six abreast In a loop both ways, the biggest picket line in Flint's history. There was to be no last-minute surrender. As the 5,000 women wearing their bright red berets arrived at the plant carrying clubs, stove pokers, crowbars and lead pipes the sit-downers inside went wild. A Chevy No. 4 worker aptly described their feelings:

"It was like we was soldiers holding the fort. It was war. The guys with me became my buddies. I remember as a kid in school readin' about Davey Crockett and the last stand at the Alamo. You know, mister, that's how I felt. Yes, sir, Chevy No. 4 was my Alamo."[64]

With world-wide interest focused on that "war," the stage was set for a showdown.

Murphy had reached the end of his rope. On the evening of February 10 he brought the injunction order to Lewis' hotel room to tell him it would be served to oust the sit-downers. Lewis replied that if that happened he would march straight to the plant and go inside to face the Guard alongside the workers.*[65]

With tens of thousands of workers in Flint surrounding the plants and refusing to surrender, with the heat and light at

Chevy 4 turned off on February 9 and 10, and nearly 5,000 sit-downers prepared to "fight to the death," on February 11, the 44th day of the sit-down, General Motors gave up. It signed a contract with the UAW, recognizing the union as sole bargaining agent in the 20 struck plants, and for all its members in the other plants, and agreed not to deal with any other group for at least six months. The union felt confident—and was later proved correct—that this was enough time to assure an overwhelming UAW majority in the GM chain. All union members were to be rehired and would suffer no discrimination because of union activity. Union buttons, a real organizing tool at that time, were permitted to be worn inside the plants. Formerly, workers had been fired on the spot for pinning one on. The injunctions were dropped. Negotiations would begin in five days on wages and working conditions. GM immediately raised wages 5c an hour in the hope of "taking the play away from the union," but nearly all the workers traced this $25 million raise directly to the UAW victory.

When the settlement was brought to the sit-downers for ratification, sharp discussion ensued. Chevy No. 4 workers were somewhat disappointed because they were not included in the sole bargaining provision, but it was felt that this certainly would be achieved in less than six months. The workers at Fisher Body No. 2 approved it after a long discussion. But at Fisher Body No. 1 the men began firing questions at their leaders: "How about the speed of the line? How about the bosses—will they be as tough as ever?"

Finally, one striker summed it up when he said: "What's the use of kidding ourselves. All that piece of paper means is that we got a union. The rest depends on us!"[66]

The Flint workers had "struck the blow which shattered the shackles of open shop tyranny!"'

Now the workers prepared to leave the plants that had been their home for 44 long days. One of them—John Thrasher of Standard Cotton, a small feeder plant for Fisher One, where the sit-down closely paralleled that of the major unit"—set down his thoughts on this occasion:

"As the exhilaration of our first union victory wore off the gang was occupied with thoughts of leaving the silent factory....

"One found himself wondering what home life would be like again. Nothing that happened before the strike began seemed to register in the mind any more. It is as if time itself started with this strike.

"What will it be like to go home and to come back tomorrow with motors running and the long-silenced machines roaring again? But that is for the future....

"One must pack. Into a paper shopping bag I place the things which helped make my 'house' a place to live in: house slippers, extra shirts, sox and underwear; razor and shaving equipment; two books; a reading lamp; and the picture of my wife that hung above my bed...

"It is near time to go. Already there is a goodly number of cars and people outside, brother workers who have come to escort us out of the plant. The first victory has been ours but the war is not over. We were strong enough to win over all the combined forces of our enemies and we shall continue to win only if we remember that through Solidarity we have been made free.

"Now the door is opening."[67]

At 5 P.M. on February 11 the whistle sounded full blast and the evacuation of Fisher Body No. I began. The thousands waiting outside cheered as Bud Simons headed up the line of workers coming out under a huge sign bearing the

declaration, "Victory Is Ours!" All the strikers carried bundles of belongings on their backs. Waves of deafening cheers resounded as entire families leaped at the men, marching like a conquering army. Lines formed and the two-mile parade to the other plants began. As the double row of marchers reached the top of the hill facing Fisher No. 2 and Chevy No. 4, great flares lit up the area. Confetti poured down and the huge gates of No. 4 opened.

As editor Kraus described it: "Lungs that were already spent with cheering found new strength as the brave men whose brilliant coup had turned the strike to definite victory began to descend the stairs. They looked haggard with exhaustion. The mark of suffering was on them. Yet their collective joy and pride submerged all this. As they came out, wives and children rushed to husbands and fathers who had not been seen for ten fear-filled days. Strong, heavily-bearded men were unashamed of tears. Then someone began to sing Solidarity:

Solidarity forever!

Solidarity forever!

Solidarity forever!

For the Union makes us strong!

and as all joined in, the moment was carried beyond its almost unbearable tenseness and emotion.'' When Fisher No. 2 had emptied, the cheering and noise "exceeded all bounds of hearing."

The thousands sang "Solidarity Forever" as they surged into Third Avenue, a human flood headed for the center of the city. They had made Flint a union town.

As UAW editor Kraus noted,[68] the spirit of the time was expressed perfectly by one slightly tipsy worker to another celebrating later in the wee hours of the morning: "Emmet, you gotta believe me'. It ain't me that's talkin', it's the CIO in me."

The immediate effects of this victory were enormous. Although AFL head Green called the settlement "a blow at all labor," a wave of strikes and sit-downs rolled across the country. In Detroit alone, in the next two weeks 87 sit-downs were begun, Packard, Goodyear, Goodrich and General Electric's Lynn, Massachusetts plant and announced immediate wage increases. Four days after the workers had marched out of GM's plants UAW membership reached 200,000. Another 100,000 were signed up in the next few months.

Briggs and Murray, two body manufacturers, gave wage hikes on the 15th; Nash-Kelvinator settled the next day; a second Briggs plant in Flint won time and one-half for overtime and a wage increase after a 7½--hour sit-down on the 17th; 3,000 women in various factories sat down in Detroit on the 18th; 2,000 more joined them the next day. By the 22nd there were 75,000 auto workers in the UAW in Detroit alone, and $75 million had been added to auto workers' wages in that model year. On the 23rd ten strikes were won in a single day and Chrysler offered increases in all departments, while agreeing to negotiate a contract with the UAW for its 75,000 -workers.

On the 24th, less than two weeks after the Flint sit-down had ended, United Press estimated that a minimum of 30,000 workers were sitting in across the country. Seventeen strikes were in progress in Detroit and 9,000 New England shoe workers had just walked out. The next day 14 new sit-downs began in Detroit. And then came the big one.

On March 2, United States Steel—the largest steel company in the world and the other giant bastion of the open shop

alongside GM—signed a contract with the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee—WITHOUT A STRIKE! After long and bloody battles dating back to the l9th century, a union had come to steel. During the auto strike, flying squads of organizers had been blanketing the steel towns of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and other states signing up workers by the thousands. The giant monopoly apparently saw the handwriting on the wall and wanted no part of a Flint-style offensive in its own mills.

The next day General Electric announced it would meet with the United Electrical Workers, CIO, to discuss a contract for its 60,000 workers. By March 3, 47 sit-down strikes had been won in Detroit, and young women working in Woolworth's had smuggled cots into the stores to attempt to bring down that million-dollar corporation.

The CIO had set its sights on organizing five million workers, a task which was virtually accomplished in less than four years. A half century of battles, of Homestead, Haymarket 1877, Pullman, packinghouse, 1919 in steel, finally came to fruition in the greatest industrial organizing drive the nation had ever seen. It had been nurtured in Akron, spread to Toledo and Cleveland, and then, when the CIO leadership set its sights on steel as the kingpin, the auto workers had come along to upset the timetable. They had determined that GM would be the kingpin, and within GM it was to be Flint, "the belly of the monster." There is hardly any doubt that the 44 days spent inside of Fisher Body Nos. I and 2 and Chevrolet Assembly No. 4 vas the turning point for the unionization at the mass-production industries in the United States. As one observer declared when the strike was barely ten days old: "The future of the Committee for Industrial Organization, most hopeful development in the history of the American labor movement, lies in the hands of the sit-down strikers who have occupied Fisher Body Plant No. I at Flint, Michigan."[69]

That this was a turning point is easily demonstrated: It was the first time that a national union had thrown all its weight behind one of its sections. It represented the triumph of industrial unionism aver the more divisive AFL craft-type unionism. As noted previously, it was the most important single factor in spurring the unionization of Big Steel. It was "the first major test of the industrial union drive… moving forward in steel and other mass production industries.''[70] Shortly afterwards, the Supreme Court, "coincidentally," reversed its previous position and declared the Wagner Act constitutional, making certain basic workers' rights legal.

Even more fundamentally, "the attack on GM was basically an attack on one of the important sectors of Wall Street,"[71] a point well understood by many of Its leaders. Mortimer had told the Fisher Body workers:

"This thing is deeper than most people realize. Behind GM is the Steel Institute. Behind the Steel Institute are the DuPonts. It is a fight between the American working class and the tap root of American capitalism."[72]

And behind GM was also the fascist Liberty League and Black Legion, spawned by some of the biggest corporate interests in the country. The auto monopoly represented a financial power that was interlocked with finance capital throughout the world. In organizing GM, the auto workers were breaking through the enemy line at one of its strongest points, which is why the repercussions spread throughout the country. While it was not a revolution—it did not, nor was its aim to, transfer state power into the hands of the working class—it was a major confrontation in the struggle between property rights and workers' rights, and many of the laws established by the ruling class to keep the workers in check were broken. GM's president, Alfred Sloan, himself recognized this new-found power of the workers when he said:

" Through the… Courts the Illegality of the 'sit-down' was established. The strikers were ordered out of the Corporation's plants. They deliberately refused to obey the orders of the Court. They were found in contempt of the Court. No effort was made by the local enforcement authorities to enforce the orders of the Court and the State itself took no action toward maintaining the authority of the law. (Sloan should have said no successful effort or action was taken, since they certainly tried—author's note) Under such circumstances, the Corporation stood powerless. Manifestly, it became a matter beyond its power to control."[73]

What exactly was this power that could strike at the "tap root" of capitalism and render GM "powerless?'

In the first place it was the overwhelming rank-and-file character of the strike. It should be remembered what the workers would have faced in a prolonged organizing struggle: company spies, blacklists, strikebreaking, firing due to union activity, tear gas, etc. The sit-down overcame all of these obstacles. But almost by definition it is in the nature of a sit-down that the rank and file must run it. It cannot succeed otherwise. The sit-down has been described as sort of a "domestic poll of the workers," Solidarity and unity are the cornerstones of its success.

Through such participation of the mass, many things became possible: demonstrations; mass picketing barring entry and discouraging attack through active defense; 24-hour picket lines; agitation through bulletins, newspapers, sound trucks, and mass singing of labor songs to bolster morale; a democratically-run strike committee with direct and large rank-and-file representation and therefore control; relief committees; free food supply, etc. It was this mass participation that enabled the workers to "take possession" of the plants and gain backing from the working-class population of a company town. This helped provide the strong outside support necessary to guarantee the existence of the sit-downers inside. Many times It was the overwhelming, all-pervasive character of the mass in motion that was largely responsible for the tremendous rapid growth of the union. Workers seeing the power of the organized group found it irresistible, especially as it accumulated victories over a heretofore-unbeatable enemy.

So predominant was this rank-and-file character that it moved in advance of the CIO leaders: "It is probably true that if… the CIO had been entirely free to pick (its) own time and place, the struggle in automobiles would have come somewhat later, might even have been postponed until after a victory had been won in steel or in rubber or in coal. The auto workers' strike was primarily a rank and file movement."[74]

The success of the rank and file and its sit-down was also based on the interlocking nature of the assembly line. On the one hand the corporations had constructed a method of production that set men "apart," concentrating on their "own" job, as a cog in a wheel, what many called "dehumanization;" on the other hand, the assembly line contained within itself the seeds of power to conquer its owners. The key to its operation was usually contained within a few departments, and the organizers set about developing a strong core of union men in those departments, vital links in a spiraling chain. The soldering and welding department, "body-in-white," was a key link in Fisher Body as was Fisher Body itself in the over-all GM empire. The belt is an interlocking form. Once cut at certain spots it becomes inoperative, as was certainly demonstrated in the lightning-like actions involved in closing down Chevy Nos. 4 and 6.

To start a sit-down, a highly organized core was all that was necessary. But a participating and supporting mass was necessary to win it.

The importance of the workers to the assembly line operation-who individually were cogs in the wheel but who collectively were the wheel itself was no better described than in the reactions of one of the sit-downers after the plants were shut: "Now we know our labor is more important than the money of the stockholders, than the gambling on Wall Street, than the doings of the managers and foremen."

But it was not some amorphous, "pure" rank and file that created the victory on its own. There was a core of leadership, and immersed in this core were the communists.

Typical was a worker like Walter Moore, Communist Party section organizer for auto in Flint, an integral member of the five-man strike strategy committee inside Fisher Body No. 1. Communists were permeating the working class, fighting for their long-advocated policy of industrial unionism to break the open shop in the citadels of monopoly capital. As Lewis' biographer, Saul Alinsky, no friend of the Left, points out in reluctant admiration:

In 1933-34 "when the AFL smashed the spirit of unionism, it was the left-wingers who zealously worked day and night picking up the pieces… and putting them together…

"When the auto workers, filled with disgust, built bonfires with their AFL membership cards, it was the left-wingers mainly who kept fighting against the disillusionment and cynicism that swept the workers. It was they who kept organizing and organizing and organizing.

"The leaders and organizers of the UAW group in General Motors were the left-wingers, Wyndham Mortimer and Robert Travis. These two built the union inside the great GM empire…

"Every place where new industrial unions were being formed, young and middle-aged Communists were working tirelessly…

"The fact is that the Communist Party made a major contribution in the organizing of the unorganized for the CIO."[75]

The Party had organized shop clubs in the auto plants before the strike. During the course of the sit-down they distributed 150,000 copies of the *Daily Worker* inside and outside the plants, with special sections devoted to the auto workers. Where these shop clubs existed, the strike was at its strongest. The effectiveness of the shop unit of the Communist Party, said William Weinstone, Party Secretary for the State of Michigan, was proven in the Flint sit-down.[76]

The leadership position of communists in these strike struggles was reflected in such situations as the one at Midland Steel, which manufactured frames for Plymouth and Lincoln. Prior to the union victory there, the company tried to bar strike organizer John Anderson from the negotiations because he had been the Communist Party candidate for governor of Michigan in 1934.

It has been generally recognized that communists built such unions as National Maritime, Transport Workers, Food and Tobacco Workers, West Coast Longshoremen and Warehousemen, the old Local (now District) 65, United Electrical Workers, Rubber Workers, and many more. Sixty of the 200 organizers sent out by the CIO' s Steel Workers Organizing Committee were members of the Communist Party.

The question arises, therefore: If the communists played such a central role in this period, why was the struggle not carried beyond unionization of the mass production industries, as necessary and magnificent a contribution as that was? What permitted the once-great CIO to sink into the morass of business unionism a generation later?

While there is no one simple answer, fundamental weaknesses existed in the Party in particular, and the left wing in general, that had great bearing on the question.

Perhaps the most important was the lack of a forthright position concerning the role of the state, of the Roosevelt-Murphy government. A class analysis of its function was sorely confused.

Not only did the Party fail to explain the class nature of the state, one that represented the ruling class and its laws against the workers, but the C.P. actually called for the use of the bosses' army, the National Guard, to protect the workers!

After the Battle of Bulls Run, the *Daily Worker* editorialized:

"The people of Michigan certainly cannot be pleased with his (Murphy's) initial statement: 'State authorities under no condition are going to take sides in this controversy.' Will the Governor not take sides in the issue of justice vs. injustice? Will he not take sides in the question of that degree of industrial democracy which unionization affords as against the black industrial autocracy of the General Motors Corporation ?…

"The progressive forces of this country expect the Governor to use the National Guard, now that it is in Flint, for the protection of the rights of the workers… (Murphy and Roosevelt) must compel the General Motors Corporation to recognize the union…"[77]

Certainly the communists must have known what Mortimer later reported, that "the Roosevelt Administration tried to pressure the negotiating committee into settlement on terms favorable to GM."*[78] And they most definitely knew of Roosevelt's role in 1934 when he obstructed the auto workers' efforts to organize their own union under the NRA.

Consider the fact that Roosevelt, the supposed champion of collective bargaining under the New Deal, failed to enforce even this law that his own administration had established. When Lewis demanded that "the law of the land" be carried out, Roosevelt avoided the issue, saying it was "not the time for headlines." This enabled GM to feel even more secure in. attempting to terrorize the workers into submission shortly after that. Roosevelt and Murphy certainly did nothing important to impede GM's use of armed company thugs, the local police, the Flint Alliance, tear gas, labor spies and other assorted standard ruling class practices. Rather, it was the workers holding the plant machinery as "hostage" that was decisive.

While on the one hand, Michigan Party secretary Weinstone did give a clear analysis in a pamphlet published after the sit-down of why Roosevelt drew back from using federal troops against the strikers, on the other, hand, in a *Daily Worker* article (Jan. 16, 1937) distributed to possibly 50,000 auto workers, he said that "The people now look to Governor Murphy to fulfill the pledges which elected him to office."

Further illusions on the role of the government along these lines were contained in the aforementioned *Daily Worker* editorial: "The Federal government and its spokesman in the Governorship of Michigan (must) compel the General Motors Corporation to recognize the union, to accept a national agreement and…the strikers' demands." Although the Party publication said it had warned the workers previously not to rely on Roosevelt, it continued to talk of the Roosevelt Administration as if it could represent the workers if enough pressure was put on it. In its January 14th editorial it reiterated that the election "mandate was violated again." And again, on the next day it demanded that the "75th Congress… bring out into the light of day sinister details of this giant trust," meaning GM.

In the last analysis, when Murphy said he was sworn to "uphold. the law," whose "law" did it become? Obviously GM's law, since to carry it out he felt duty-bound to remove the workers from the plants. It was never a question of "upholding the law" by telling GM's thugs, police and vigilantes would have to fight the National Guard if they attempted to invade the struck plants.

The Party failed to explain the class nature of the law, at a time when hundreds of thousands of workers, inside and outside the plants, were reading its publications, * The fact is that the sit-downers DID break the ruling class's laws in occupying the factories. This presented an opportunity to explain the nature of the law and WHY it was unjust, what class had enacted it and for whose benefit.

The murky nature of the Party's attitude on the question of the class nature of the state was clearly revealed in its position on Roosevelt's "court-packing" plan. When the Supreme Court repeatedly struck down New Deal legislation, Roosevelt proposed to expand the body to fifteen by adding six new justices to what was referred to as the "nine old men." In supporting this plan,, the Party referred to the "nine old men" as "puppets of Wall Street"[79] It thereby implied that the new

Roosevelt-appointed justices might serve the people rather than Wall Street. While the people may certainly conduct a fight for their rights through the courts as one avenue of struggle, certainly the Communist Party was feeding illusions in what could be gained from the Court in a capitalist society, by labeling one set of justices "Wall Street puppets" who could conceivably be overcome by "better" ones who wouldn't serve the ruling class.

And just in case the new court didn't do the right thing, the Party declared that the "main job will not be done until the White House and Congress REPUDIATE COMPLETELY the usurped powers of the Supreme Court." (*Worker,* Feb. 8, 1937) This implied that somehow the White House and Congress might be inclined to "protect" the people against the Court's arbitrary actions—feeding the belief in the effectiveness of the so-called checks and balances of the three branches of the ruling class government.

Despite the fact that the Party ran a candidate for President in 1936, for the most part it pushed a position that tailed Roosevelt. It put its main blast on the Republican candidate, Alf Landon, labeling him the representative of the most reactionary open-shoppers, like GM and U.S. Steel, who might move to fascism. Even if that were true, the C.P. clearly implied that the Roosevelt Administration would somehow take the workers' side if "Pushed" hard enough, just the way It implies now (1968—editor's note) that Johnson would if freed from the Pentagon's "chains."

The post-war assault on the left-wing leaders of the CIO succeeded, in part, because the Party had failed to give the ideological leadership necessary to withstand such an attack.

The fact is that Roosevelt did not use Federal troops to intervene on the side of GM because of a chain of reasons: 1) The workers had announced in advance that they would offer stiff resistance to any such attempts, and a bloodbath would follow. This would have seriously damaged1the image of the "democratic" New Deal which Roosevelt was so carefully nurturing to save the system during the disastrous depression. 2) Such open intervention would arouse the entire working class against both the corporations and the Administration. 3) These first two reactions would be a severe blow to the Democratic Party, and therefore to the two-party system inside of which the workers were bound so securely. And 4), the final result might become a strong case for an independent workers' party to challenge the ruling-class parties on a higher level, possibly even having a socialist goal—or at least some form of "public ownership" of the means of production.

Roosevelt (and Murphy) were caught in this contradiction and kept holding off the use of troops because the risk of exposure of the true nature of the state was too great, especially following so closely on the heels of the 1936 Democratic landslide.

In reading more than 100 issues of the *Daily Worker*, from December, 1936 to March, 1937, one finds no real exposure of the relationship of the state to the ruling class. The Party's own members, for the most part, were part of a united front behind Roosevelt. It criticized him mainly from the point of view that he either "made mistakes," as with an embargo on aid to anti-fascist forces in Spain, or he didn't go "far enough" in championing the workers' cause. The Party rarely declared that Roosevelt was following the age-old policy of the "carrot and the stick," that is, allowing some labor reform while at the same time permitting all kinds of locally, and company-inspired violence to be used against the workers all across the country. Certainly the defense measures taken by the sit-downers in the final days were in expectation that if the National Guard was used at all it would be used against them. From their own experience, that was the only possible conclusion they could reach.

The C.P. based its support of the New Deal on a united front against fascism and monopoly. But by relying on the Democrats, it fed the illusion that a ruling-class party could give this kind of leadership. It left the working class, and its own members, totally ill-prepared for the shift in emphasis from the carrot to the stick that occurred after World War 11, when the left-wing movement and the progressive nature of the CIO were virtually wiped out by a big business, Cold War offensive.

One could say that the sweep of events was so swift and overwhelming that no one could have been prepared to gauge fully its implications and act to guarantee against backsliding. Although a socialist revolution was not necessarily the order of the day, the ruling class greatly feared the working masses might approach that idea if they broke out of the two-party, "state-is-neutral" box. It was precisely this fact that Roosevelt recognized and the C.P. glossed over.

One might conclude that at least the working class could have emerged from this struggle with the conviction that it needed an independent political party (if it didn't actually bring one into being) and with a much greater understanding of the rule of the state, class society, and "the law." These were functions which the C.P. could have performed but apparently neglected at best, and thus many times fed illusions to the workers on these fundamental questions.

Had the communists developed a long-range strategy for socialist revolution, or at least stuck to the concept that a working-class smashing of the ruling-class state was necessary, along with establishment of a workers' state apparatus, then they and thousands of workers would not have fallen into the trap of reasoning that events would depend on who pushed the "neutral," "democratic" Roosevelt harder, GM or the auto workers.

Despite any shortcomings afterwards, the Flint Sit-down and its stimulus to the CIO was an historic victory for the U.S. working class. Without it, the ability of the workers in the mass production industries to fight big business would have been severely hampered. The story of how this advance was sold out by "leaders" such as Walter Reuther is a subject in itself. However, the recent period has seen the greatest wave of wildcat strikes in auto in many years. The failure of the Reuther leadership to fight the auto companies is being exposed more and more. Rebellious workers who refuse to be saddled with sellouts under three and five-year contracts are increasingly coming to the fore. Part of the answer to these problems is a program consisting of a thirty-hour week for forty hours pay; an end .to speed-up; worker control of production standards; a worker-enforced safety code; a ban on compulsory overtime; a grievance procedure which can be backed up by strikes in the face of company refusal to settle; and a healthy wage increase to meet the rising cost of living caused by skyrocketing profits.

To fight for such a program not only is the "spirit of 1937" needed, but also a core of rank-and-file militants to organize a national rank-and-file movement on a plant-by-plant basis around the country, similar to the kind of organization Mortimer and Travis brought to fruition in Flint, Cleveland and Detroit. And what is needed to sustain such a movement is true communist leadership with a working-class ideology.

As the sit-downer noted when he left the plant, "The first victory has been ours but the war is not over." To win that "war," the power of the working class must be correctly estimated. If there is one overriding lesson to be learned from the Great Flint Sit-Down, it is that workers acting in unity and solidarity can triumph over the most powerful weapons the ruling class throws against them. Certainly the' National Guard had an overwhelming superiority in arms with which to slaughter the auto workers. But the strikers won because of the very contradictions created by the system, itself: the Guard would have destroyed not only General Motors if it invaded the plants, but the illusion that workers have something to gain from a bosses' state, bosses' laws and a bosses' party. Superiority of arms could not triumph because the profit system had created an interlocking assembly line, dependent on thousands of workers for its operation, which, if destroyed, would cause a breakdown in that very profit system. Taking advantage of this contradiction, the workers perfected the sit-down tactic and "the door opened" slightly.

It remains for the present members of the UAW-CIO, heirs to an inspiring heritage, to fling that door wide open, letting in the sun of a rank-and-file-led union once more. It could fall to the auto workers to again take the lead—setting the pace for similar movements all over the country—but this time to build a society in which the workers' law, the workers' party and the workers' state is supreme.